



## **Book review: Tereza Kuldova, How Outlaws Win Friends and Influence People**

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## Book Review

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Governments find them increasingly intolerable, fans openly and secretly idolize them. If outlaw motorcycle clubs are a progressively popular phenomenon worldwide, Tereza Kuldova argues, then we must understand what makes them appealing and desirable. This book takes outlaws that ride roaring stallions seriously, describing them as relevant contemporary anti-establishment forces. Drawing on, among others, Edmund Burke, Georges Bataille, Ernest Becker and psychoanalytic theory, it investigates motorcycle clubs by answering the same question from different angles: how do these groups gain admirers and supporters, and why are they becoming increasingly popular right now?

This study is based on more than a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Austria, Germany, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic where Kuldova frequented the outlaw biker milieu and its support groups. She also traced the groups' online expressions, through publicly available Websites, blogs, and social media accounts connected to different clubs, as well as delving into the rich repertoire of popular media produced on the theme of bikers. Analytically, Kuldova masters the art of weaving together a vast array of material, ranging from field observations, film and fiction analyses, auto-ethnographic insights, to biker erotica narratives (yes, this is a thing, and you should read this book, if anything, just to learn about its fan base). This book's very form is at once an account *and* an expression of a multimodal universe. The contemporary reader that navigates screens, paperbacks and podcasts will feel entertained and at home in reading this monograph.

Chapter 1 introduces the nature and development of outlaw motorcycle clubs across the global north, tracing their genealogy through their relationship to the broader political economic structures within which they exist. The tendency in criminological accounts of outlaw groups, whether they are gangs, bandits, mafias or pirates, is to comment on this relationship by taking sides; either by condemning the criminals (e.g. Cohen 1955; Katz 1988) or by sympathizing with them as victims of a larger system (e.g. Hobshawn 1969; Moore 1978). Instead, throughout her book, Kuldova paints a nuanced picture that highlights both moments of structural subjection, as well as acts that embody a sovereign, disruptive and problematic agency. This allows the analysis to avoid falling into the victim vs. villain complex: here, we are presented with a sociological unit of study that is interesting in and of itself.

Chapter 2 deals with the aesthetics of their power, and explores the different registers and mechanisms of seduction that occur between the bikers and the "gazers", the general public that admires and fears them. By bringing in Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime, Kuldova shows how

this genre of attraction has much to do with consuming danger and death at a safe distance. Nobody is innocent in this process. Spectators play a central role in staging these groups' performance, both in their minds and in their practices, while bikers skillfully capitalize on their allure in their public performances and commercial strategies. Chapter 3 goes on to study what it is that this allure is channeled towards, and what it caters to: a desire for sovereignty. Because the welfare state is in demise, Kuldova argues, these groups provide anti-establishment forms of governance. They provide jobs, support networks, and cash flow. But more importantly, outlaw motorcycle clubs provide infrastructures of self-determination; opportunities to feel empowered in an otherwise overly-patronizing "neoliberal" governance that securitises and regulates individuals without actually providing for them. A strict father who plays all his earnings in the casino will have children who crave nurture and appreciation. Chapters 4 and 5 explore two different mechanisms through which bikers achieve this recognition. The first is to stage settings that are sacred, such as commemorative events that immortalise the members, or strenuous initiation rituals that heighten the value of the membership. The resulting symbolic orders contribute to "inducing a sense of empowerment and self-transformation" (p.133). Secondly, and connectedly, these collectives find affirmation by appealing to sensations of authenticity. The final chapter describes different ways in which the social bond within these groups is fortified through acts of sacrifice. Here sacrifice has little to do with an abstract, symbolic ideology, but rather with the very act of giving (or even dying) for the brothers. Bikers practice trust, loyalty and this way, they become not simply worthy of recognition, but of someone else's life.

Several commendable aspects of this study derive from the ethnographic insights that its methodology affords. Because Kuldova is a woman, she is kept out of the clubs' criminal aspects, which is why she works with the façade of the motorcycle clubs. This turns out to be an advantage, because the question she ends up answering regards the contact points that the clubs have with the outside. In fact, she explores their relation to the broader social order they navigate, the structures they are subject to, but also, their own curation and self-presentation, the instances where they affirm themselves as subjects. However, Kuldova does not construct impermeable analytical distinctions between the communicative processes that occur on the "inside" and on the "outside" of the clubs. And this is where she excels in her contribution. Throughout the various chapters of the book, she demonstrates that motorcycle clubs' aura, their sovereign position, and their monstrous allure are produced in an articulate composition of actors and media. Indeed, although the theme of seduction within criminal environments is not new, Kuldova moves beyond the clear-

cut separation between the affective communication that happens *inside* the groups and how they operate *outwards* (e.g. Katz 1988; Gambetta 2009). Rather, what she traces are non-linear communicative processes, where the internal and external identification factors interact and overlap. For example, she points out that club members themselves, of course, play a crucial role in branding their product and making it sacred through rituals and practices of exclusivity. But so do journalists, politicians, musicians, legislators, filmmakers, crime-fiction readers and fans through their sensationalist framing of bikers which invigorates and fortifies their position. In other words, the social unit “outlaw motorcycle club” has emergent properties (DeLanda 2006:13), and although Kuldova certainly would not put it in these terms, her analysis is one that highlights the diverse territorializing forces involved in their making (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:88). That is to say, she illustrates the processes that keep the clubs together and make them last without preventively prioritizing one order (e.g. the media ecology that surrounds them) over another (e.g. their internal hierarchical structuring).

To sum up the answer to the book’s central question, one could say that Kuldova believes that outlaws win friends and influence people by offering them; a) a sublime aesthetic universe which fills the otherwise over-regulated monotony with a thrill; b) a sacred space in an desecrated cultural economy where everything is for sale, c) a sense of sovereignty that is not merely ideological but pragmatic, in a time where State sovereignty is under demise; d) and a network of solidarity that fabricates authentic feelings of belonging, where people are willing to sacrifice something for you, be it their life, their money, or more banally, their own immediate self-interest.

This book is set in a hyper-mediated, technological era that has morphed the political landscape. It illustrates processes of conviction in action, and demonstrates how these work beyond knowledge and rationality, but rather through movements of attraction, repulsion and excess. Indeed one of its central contributions is to highlight how these processes are often irrational, and thereby, that “[m]isinformation and ignorance are not the real problem and hence knowledge is not the cure” (p. xviii). Although the actors of this book are not your most obvious political figures, they provide excellent lenses through which to read persuasion mechanisms used by other political actors -- from heads of States, to non-governmental actors such as Greenpeace, terrorist organisations or Apple. Overall, the author paints a rather bleak picture of contemporary society, exposing a series of profound deficiencies to which these outlaws to some extent cater. Although I disagree with this totalising, all-encompassing “neoliberal” diagnosis -- as there are many forms of social organisation

that do not reproduce these malaises, nor emerge from a lack -- I agree with the points of tension identified by Kuldova. Indeed, while this is a book about a rather reactionary group, if read in a constructive light, it indirectly provides a set of tools for progressive politics. In order to create a liberal, tolerant, and more desirable political order, one must work with the same instruments that appeal to groups such as these (Knudsen & Jerne 2019:195). This is what the left has been blind to in its institutional, grassroots and intellectual expressions across the global north. Therefore, I recommend this book not only to scholars and to admirers of outlaws and bikers, but also to academics who are trying to comprehend and challenge the contemporary political ecology, and to activists who are seeking to improve their political repertoire and image. For bikers have a lot to teach the left.

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